

Sci-*phi* ethics: foreverism v. existentialism



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*A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.*

– John Keats, [Endymion](#).

They give birth astride a grave, the light gleams an instant, then its night once more.

– Samuel Beckett, [Waiting for Godot](#).

What ethical obligations do we have to the not-yet-born? This is one of the hottest topics in the field of population ethics. Camps may be divided in two: the *Foreverists*, who think we owe much more than we may expect, and those who argue that the best we may do for future generations is not bring them into existence in the first place, the *Existentialists*. The heart of the philosophical problem is that it is very difficult to take a *rationaly defensible* stance between these extremes. First, because of the *moral non-identity problem*: “If these change *too* much and/or *too* fast, that is to say, inorganically, *why care* what happens to future people?¹ Isn’t the rational basis of any kind of human caring grounded in a capacity to *identify* with the object? And isn’t this capacity only possible because of an affinity beyond

1. *If* it is correct even to think of them as “people” or moral subjects or objects at all...

the merely causal?”² And, second, there is blatant *human exceptionalism*: some scriptures³ insist the universe was expressly created with *us* in mind, but much militates against such a belief on *secular* grounds. Even supposedly irreligious people fall into this way of thinking. Full comprehension of the situation seems to leave us only the options of planned self-extinction or extinction by transformation: die, or *learn* to identify with something that has only a virtual connection with us.⁴

The phrase “science *ph*iction” concerns rational speculation about how reason connects – or doesn’t, as the case may be – us *now* with some vision about what has not happened yet but may be causally related to us. We call “sci-*phi*” ethics what we think we ought to do *now* to ameliorate the experiences of, as yet, *non-existing* sentient beings.⁵ *What* can we rationally ask ourselves to do for them?⁶

“To be [*forever*], or not to be [*forever*], that is the question”
– Hamlet

Terms of infearment: a short glossary

I. *Species of foreverism*

We start with a contemporary ethically-laden movement about the future, [*Effective Altruism*](#). EA is philosophy-driven in a more rigorous way than many past movements similarly motivated. It is the belief that we are *morally* obligated to maximize well-being and minimize pain and suffering in the most *efficient* manner possible. There is no qualification about the nearness in time or space of the deprecated states. A philosophical corollary of EA is that, because of the sheer magnitude of likely *future* states or conditions with potential for sentience and liable to affliction, concern about these must loom *more* ethically pressing than concerns about *present or actual* states or conditions of sentient and/or rational beings. Hence, since such future events – or non-events – are more central to our ethical

2. We are the *cause* of our excrement, but we *don’t* identify with it. It is a biological artifact. As children are. But the latter embody aspiration. Our material and cultural artifacts do as well. They are a record of our engagement, of *having been* here, of having more than merely survived. Artifacts are imbued with value because of the effort and sacrifice we directly lay claim to in their making. (We don’t spend much time *thinking* about digestion or its consequences.) But such proprietary identification wanes rapidly. We are psychologically incapable of projecting agency, hence responsibility, much beyond what impinges on the near-term. This is why it is so difficult to take climate change more seriously, or why *your* great grandparents likely gave little explicit thought to the quality of *your* life... We discuss the non-identity problem in greater detail later. Briefly, the non-identity problem is a version of the ancient [Ship of Theseus](#) problem inflected by psychologically qualified intuitions: how much may something change before its *humanly scrutable* identity is lost – and, becoming something else, raises the ethical question of why care, any more, about its fate. Except abstractly. But if we *should* care about abstractions (*you* were very much an abstraction to your distal forbears), then a humanly unfathomable world of possibility opens up. It is not merely that we are intrinsically short-sighted, as that the reasons *not to be* are *rationally* obscure. See Resources below on “the moral non-identity problem.”

3. E.g., *Genesis* 1:28: “Be fruitful, and multiply...”

4. “*Learn*” to identify...? That means the identification would be a non-natural, hyper-natural, inorganic, i.e., “emergent” outcome. What can “emergent” signify in this context? An inexorable evolutionary process? If so, there is *nothing doing*. We are only along for the ride; we are not driving the evolutionary machine. Or an ethical mandate, as the theories, foreverism and ~~existentialism~~, under consideration here advert to? If so, read on...

5. The “science” part stems from the fact that what we know about ourselves and the world we live in, largely science-based, can’t fail but inform the speculation. But scientific practice – itself, *always* a “work in progress” – may not determine, only color, forward speculation.

6. The topic is population ethics, a branch of applied ethics inaugurated by late British philosopher Derek Parfit, who asked questions and entertained puzzles about what the future asks of us in his classic book [Reasons and Persons](#).

obligations than present ones, the rational utilization of our resources *now* to either avert or promote certain bad or good *future* events should rise to the top of our priorities. All that *is* is temporary. Even present badness. But what is to come is eternal, never-ending... because there is, potentially, *infinitely more* of it. Quantity matters if you are rational. Better forestall a mountain of suffering tomorrow than a pinprick now. It follows further, that we are under an obligation to amass great resources, press these into the service of developing new tools and methods, and use these for maximum ethical impact. A *future, not present*, focus enables this. Anything less is moral failure. And because this does not now describe how we typically do charity, we are failing.

A saying goes, “Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.”⁷ EA implies you do *harm* by giving him the fish when you could teach him how to fish... Or *would* imply that if fishing itself was not an *unnecessary* infringement on sentience. Better teach (or engineer) him to harvest and [digest seaweed](#).⁸

Longtermism is a presupposition of effective altruism. To pull off EA, we need to be around to amass and deploy the requisite resources. Since there is no upper limit to the grandness of EA’s goal or the resources its pursuit will require, we must make plans to be around for the long-haul – *forever*, if we can. And whatever it takes to make “forever” real for us is what we *ought* to be doing. A first step in fixing anything is to be present. We cannot fix anything when we are not on the scene to fix it (at least, not yet). On this view, then, *foreverness* is not merely desirable but a *moral imperative*.⁹

Longtermism dovetails with some forms of **Transhumanism**, the general view that we, in biological form – or *any form in whose causal history we will figure*, that is, our *perpetual* existence is what is demanded of us. This implies that some or all of our future descendants may not be fully – or at all – biological, but that we should care about them anyway. Even sentience, as we know it, is nothing sacred. What better way to relieve pain and suffering than by engineering our causal descendants to be free of any capacity for the experience of such negative states?¹⁰

Foreverism, we use as a blanket term to capture the no-end-in-sightness common to EA, transhumanism, and longtermism.¹¹ (The suffix “-term,” short or long, implies an end, a *finite* teleology or eschatology of a sort. Hence, not adequate. Any whiff of finitude is ruled out of foreverness.) We will define *ethical foreverism* as an open-ended imperative to do good. Unlike functionally similar, more traditional, notions, it is *not* driven by any kind of end state or final attainment or completion. No explicit “redemption,” “salvation,” “fulfillment,” “static Utopian vision,” or anything like these is necessary or useful.¹² Foreverism assumes there will *always* be more to ameliorate, an infinite supply of

7. [“Give a man a fish.”](#)

8. Though even this measure could stand improvement. Moral development cannot be static. We are required to strain our consciences to see how... Better still, consider ~~existentialism~~ described below. Pushing moral imperatives to the vanishing point is characteristic of both foreverism and ~~existentialism~~. But this sky-scraping tendency, by itself, we suggest is no argument against them, since whether we *should* vanish, one way or another – through extinction *or* transformation – is the question.

9. [“Against longtermism: It started as a fringe philosophical theory about humanity’s future. It’s now richly funded and increasingly dangerous.”](#) Aeon, a critique by Émile P. Torres. And [here](#) is a somewhat *ad hominem* critique of Torres.

10. Non-stop orgasms may be in our future if we forestall [post coitum triste](#) since there will not to be an “after” to be sad about.

11. As used here, “foreverism” is not quite the idea that the [tentativeness of the present is forever](#), though it may imply that. Nor [the marketing variant](#), though it may imply that, too. It is *tantamount* to not *envisioning a denouement*.

12. Implicit? We are less certain. To the extent foreverism insinuates some kind of normativity, it is pushing some agenda, mysterious though it might be.

things requiring it. Even if this necessitates the creation of conditions for more *needing* to be done. For, an end-state would signal a *completed* task, but, like house-cleaning, good-doing is never done once and for all. As long as you live in a home, and you *should*¹³ always want to, it will need you to clean it. This need your environment has for endless maintenance and improvement is your excuse, nay, dictates your marching orders for an eternity.

We *may* be here temporarily, we *may* go out of existence for reasons *not* causally-related to us or anything we do or can do, but morality will never let us rest content with that. And it cannot be a mere wish – rather, it is *a moral imperative* that we work on making mortality and morbidity obsolete: one way or another.

Another way might be to consider that it would have been...

2. “*Better never to have been*”¹⁴: Non-existentialism

Foreverism can be exhausting – even just to contemplate. We dub the general attitude of these who incline oppositely: **Non-existentialism** or **Existentialism**. There are a number of schools captured by “existentialism,” including **Antinatalists**, **Existence-regretters**,¹⁵ and a sizable, motley crew of those who prioritize present and near (spatial, geographical, biological) and near-term (temporal) ethical goals even at the expense of any future experience at all.¹⁶ The common thread is finitude. Past and present suffering, and the demands these make on our moral resources *matter more* than speculations about future bridges we may – or may not – fall off of.

The antinatalists go so far as to suggest that the best we can do now is the elimination of the future experience of crossing speculative bridges altogether. The abandonment of hope for a brighter future or even *any* future – if not for us, then at least for somebody *might* hurt. But the loss of opportunities for joy and happiness is not a *bad* sufficient to outweigh the *good* of preventing exposure to any opportunity at all, which will, for a long time yet, entail experiencing negative states such as pain, suffering, and death. Any number of orgasms cannot *ethically* make up for exposure to death. Ironically, the more blessed your life is, or has been, the more its termination *ought* to hurt.¹⁷ You are being irrational to think otherwise. You can only *feel* the loss of something you *had* or *may expect to have*. If this is true of you, why would you think it not true of those you invite to existence?

13. The intimation of a “should” is what we allude to when we suggest a religious motivation. Adiaphorous nature has never “cared” less what we do or don’t do. We are a phase of a process going nowhere in particular. Embarrassed any longer to invoke the supernatural, we pull mysterious imperatives out of the air.

14. The title of David Benatar’s book which sparked the topic [we discussed here](#).

15. Saul Smilansky inclines toward a “pro-regret” view of existence. Given all the historical horrors that *had* to have happened for *precisely* us to be here, it seems unconscionable not to wish that these events had not happened – and we had not either. “[Morally, Should We Prefer Never To Have Existed?](#)” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 2013, Vol. 91, No. 4, 655–666. And to see how our moral debt can get worse, see Guy Kahane’s piece, “[Was evolution worth it?](#)” *Philosophical Studies*, Sep 2022.

16. I am guessing, *most* people, especially when made aware of the implications. We, of course, don’t take what “most” people think as an endorsement of the morally correct view. At best, it serves to suggest what you, as an advocate of one of these views, are up against.

17. And, suppose by the time you are on your deathbed, transported there by old age, you are at peace with your denouement. This feeling of reconciliation is rooted in what? Some psychological/biological/evolutionary dispensation, that is, it is a state with *only* a causal explanation, not a rational justification? Or is it that you successfully *reasoned* your way into this state (as philosophers are wont to try)?... Our next topic will explore how perilously close “proper” reasoning can be to rationalization.

The right thing to do is to gracefully, but collectively, quit the scene. We need an exit plan. Not through genocide or omnicide, of course. **Existentialist** views, recall, are *ethically*-motivated: they are all about *minifying* the experience of the negative states of existents and those we can (without too much imagination) picture becoming existents (near-offspring). The end of life for most living things is one such, especially troublesome, negative state. Even with the best of luck, it is not realistic to think your children *won't* die. Since those of us already here are fully invested in our existence, it behooves *us* to make the best of our predicament. But the unborn don't have this investment.

Thus, just because they won't make up for the tragedy of the opportunity to have them doesn't mean you shouldn't enjoy your orgasms... But it does mean saying "no" to having babies. *These* are not worse off for not having *your* consolation prize.

Being "dead" serious

Again, the core notion undergirding **existentialism** is our contingency and finitude.¹⁸ It is part of our definition as human beings that we are animals, part of the biosphere, and like everything else in the biosphere, subject to limitation: *we are going to die* – as individuals *and* as a species. Nothing about us indicates a design with foreverness in mind. It is not just that we and nothing else alive lives forever, but that – more important to the rationally-able – what may develop from us will *cease* to be identifiable with us even if we – or some part, some ontological interpretation of us – does, in fact, somehow endure without limitation. In the same sense that we are literally *not* the food we eat, we are *not* our excrement, either. If we think otherwise, we may as well identify with the subset of the elements of the periodic table which fully comprise us. But this kind of "basic constituent" identification does not have intrinsic application to any of our *live* projects, and, for sure, cannot, on pain of incoherence, be a source of *solace*. Not unless we imbue with thought and desire the gases and ashes produced from our cremation... If can no longer discern "dead" objects because we have "become one with all," there can be no point in insisting that anything is alive, either. **Existentialists** take our humanity/animality "dead" seriously. Biology is a real thing. Living things emerge, *then* die, and sometimes *should* die. They must die to make room for more stuff to happen in a universe that was never much involved anyway with *them* – that is, *us*.¹⁹ This normative imperative places **existentialists** starkly at odds with foreverists.²⁰

18. Thus, what I call "**existentialism**" is *not* incompatible with most "existentialisms" (of the Pascalian, Kierkegaardian, Nietzschean, Sartrean, de Beauvoirian, Weilian etc., even Wittgensteinian varieties). All take finitude seriously.

Existentialism (without the slash) makes finitude a condition of appropriating experience: it is concerned with how to *face* being here. While **existentialism** draws an ethical mandate derived from comparing the moral fall out of our *being* here to our *not being* here: it asks, "what is so great about our being here that we will *subject* as-yet-non-existing others to it?"

19. And this self-limiting "should" – the claim is – is naturally-generated: It is an observed *natural* progression. It appears to emerge as a bit of meta-normativity – a natural law of biological evolution. Sometime illnesses or wounds self-limit: either by retreating/healing or by bringing about the non-existence of their hosts. This is the etiology of consciousness. We are being descriptive about being normative.

20. Who must be so vain as to think creation *is* about us (again, a whiff of the religious)... Here, we purposely court the ambiguity in saying we *will* die and saying we *should* die. What if we *evolved* psychologically, as Freud entertained (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920), a *will* to die – alongside the will to endure that occupies us most of the time? That the *is* and the *should* may collapse has aesthetic *appeal*, which, too, may manifest beautiful economy in nature. Nature may be vain, but not overly so. She thinks herself beautiful. We are *her* eyes and *her* mirror. These describe our function. We are not, the suggestion is, quite as anthropocentric as we may think. We may care about the universe enough to concede our finitude. We may evolve to be self-deprecating creatures. Perhaps, this humility is the pinnacle of moral development.

“Living” forever

Many EAs, longtermists, and transhumanists do not see much point in preserving our present *material* integrity, except instrumentally. What we traditionally call our “humanity” or “animality” is just a phase. Obviously, we don’t yet know enough to have an impact on the world while *biologically* non-existent, but who’s to say we won’t manage it soon enough to make normative plans? Moreover, if biology gets in the way of some interpretation of our perdurance, so much the worse for biology. We cannot foreclose the possibility that we may transcend our biological near-sightedness, and exercise our imaginative capacity sufficiently to fathom the thought of foreverness actually finding application to something *related* to us. *Identity* is an act of will, not a given, their suggestion is.²¹ And, as such, our wills are subject to moral imperatives: “Thou shalt imagine foreverness.”

Implicit in the premises of EA is that experience of *any* sort, even one with a certain modicum of badness about it, is a self-validating object of value – dependent on nothing else. Just to be, no matter what else, is a good thing. Thus, more experience is better than less, even if the character of the existence is less than optimal,²² and so because it is only by existing that there is any hope of improving its character. It’s not that the quality of existence is not important, but that, precisely because it is as important, we need to promote its quantity, a foreverist may intimate. *Quality* of experience is instrumental to augmenting its *quantity*, and vice versa.²³

For the foreverist, non-existence would be intolerably *more* tragic than even a pretty miserable existence.²⁴ We might as well identify with that which is in the causal history of what comes after our biological selves if *organic* biology is of no consequence. An indication of our having been here would be nice. Surely, our prehistoric ancestors (from whom we must have inherited our high self-regard), would be flattered to know their bones have been dug up and under glass for display and edification. Or, if not bones, *at least* their artifacts. Artifactual survival will have to do. We sometimes evince the imagination for it.

Engineered biology will grease the wheels of identification with what “wins,” that is, *survives*. Somehow, the universe must value us whether dead or alive biologically. Values must be free-floating entities, not requiring biological housing. Maybe we should then drop the biological distinction – or, alternatively, keep it but only *if* being “alive” is conducive to the eventual identification with the non-biological and *if* such identification is helpful in bringing about the foreverness of the identification. But that would be the extent of biology’s utility. The connection between being here and biology is contingent, we may be under an obligation to “make it so.”²⁵ The foreverist seems to contend.

Anything less is distinctly *unnatural* arrogance, a bit of evolutionary shamelessness. Or just, *to us* – compelled, as we are, to think otherwise, arbitrariness.

21. Identity *as an act of will* is currently fashionable, we note.

22. It is the source of repugnance Parfit saw in his infamous “Repugnant Conclusion.” How can *more* life *not* be desirable as long as it is marginally worth living?

23. See our discussion of Parfit below.

24. Miserable from *our* bounded, tentative, perspective. But what is *impersonal*, non-proprietary, misery? Won’t our lives *now*, seen from some future being’s perch, be judged intolerable? Why didn’t we kill ourselves collectively right off, when we had the technological means to? They, these future beings, might well wonder. How many of us *now* would want to trade places with an evolutionary ancestor, a cave person? Wittgenstein thought these comparisons bordered on incoherence. (This is recorded in [an anecdote](#) by Rush Rhees.) He may have been prefiguring “the non-identity problem” well before Parfit. And if the comparisons are incoherent, does this undermine the ambitions of foreverism?

Falling off bridges *before* we come to them

One bridge we may fall off of is this: suppose we run out of local room and resources to accommodate the needs of future people – or *the causal fallout of* “people” whatever form this may take, then we must take steps *now* to forestall this possibility. If overpopulation, climate change, or an oncoming asteroid threatens the habitability of earth, we will need to find, or make, *new* earths. And there will never be a point when we are morally justified in saying “enough is enough, no more terraforming.” More “experience,” had by anyone or anything, is better. *Always*. More, *then* better. In that order. *Always*. We may call it “biological manifest destiny” if even biology were a curb on EA/longtermist ambitions... But it is not: if we evolve away from biological uniforms, that, too, must figure in the *foreverness* agenda. What is essential here is *an etiological trajectory built-into our existence-description*. (It will be the manifest destiny of our aspirations.) We are not going anywhere,²⁶ in particular. We are just *going* and must not stop. The journey is everything. We owe it the universe to bless it eternally with either our presence, or an artifact of our former presence, imbued with our identity.²⁷

But...

Existentialists radically disagree. While the augmentation of pleasure and happiness of those present and capable of these experiences are genuine values to be promoted, the minimization of present and *non*-speculative pain and suffering in all its forms is always the *greater* obligation. It *always* takes priority: fully *as* urgent and *as feasible*, is the *prevention* of opportunities for pain and suffering to manifest in the first place. And nothing prevents these with greater surety than *not* being in a position to experience them, according to the antinatalist. We should not subject sentient beings to pain and suffering. The loss of opportunities for the *non-existent* to experience their opposites – i.e, pleasure and happiness, which are *not* themselves even ethically justified compensation for sentient existents, cannot, perforce, be compensatory for the non-existent.

We owe the non-existent nothing except to prevent them from existing – from being placed in the same position we are in: subject to episodes involving “slings and arrows,” relieved with spells of Keatsian beauty and joy... “Thanks, but no thanks,” the unconceived can be imagined to think from their “original positions” behind blessed “veils of ignorance.” That we are here at all is evidence of past moral failure. It didn’t get prevented in our case, obviously. Maybe, we can excuse our ancestors their ignorance of this realization, but we cannot avail ourselves of the same exculpating excuse. Now that we have been alerted, it’s too late *for us* to pretend innocence. At the very least, we, the *formerly*

25. A recent documentary about what the foreverists are up to: “[Living Forever Through AI: Digital Immortality and the Future of Death](#).” Foreverism reeks of religion, we can’t but notice.

26. *Something* may be... what is our relation to this something?

27. Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, among other entrepreneurial “ethicists,” have extraterrestrial plans to “save us” from existential calamity. They must be thinking along these lines. The “more is better” mantra is explicit. (The non-existent don’t “add to shopping carts.”)... But it’s not clear that more progressive-leaning thought doesn’t as well. Marx didn’t explain fully what *the endgame* of dialectical *materialism* was. Was history supposed to end after certain material developments? And with it, a recognizable *us*? Like Smith, Marx suffered a formidable optimism, difficult to justify inductively without enforcing time-restricted blinders. What could *rationality* motivate such a restriction? Obviously – causally, impersonally, amorally – nature may explain, *but never justify*. Justification is born of normativity. And normativity, in turn, of *contingency* and *finitude*. These are things that are *only biocentrically* attributable to the cosmos. Indeed, all *attribution*, as endemic to us as breathing, is a biocentric phenomenon.

existentially blameless, should be filled with *regret* that we are privileged to be here at all to regret – *not* seeking ways to justify our species’ horrific ancestral behavior²⁸ and its repetition forever and ever.²⁹

Regret: a first step in wishing ourselves away

To regret or not to regret... Israeli philosopher Saul Smilansky suggests³⁰ that we toy with immorality *not* to regret our existence. He argues that some quite common moral intuitions support the conclusion that we *ought* to regret that we, the particular individuals we are, were born. Think of all the stuff that *had* to have happened in order for you to be here. The entire universe, in all its impersonal, adiaphorous nastiness and, perforce, human history *had* to have taken a certain course for your biological parents to have conceived *precisely* you. The slightest change in those preconditions would have resulted in no, or a different, child than you being born. If any of those changes had occurred much that we can all agree is bad would not have happened. The Holocaust, for example, human slavery, innumerable genocides and wars, wholesale extinctions of species, unaverted natural calamities, the unimaginable suffering that evolutionary natural selection *must* have entailed...³¹

At some point *in your ancestry*, someone (probably many such) brutally tortured and/or murdered someone else (probably many such). Thankfully, you probably don’t know specifically who these were, and few of us are interested in learning, but it *must* have happened: that’s how your genes got into you and not into the descendants of your ancestor’s victims. Had that not happened, you, the specific person you are, wouldn’t be here. The descendants of your ancestor’s victims would, instead. If you believe in natural selection, it cannot have been otherwise.³²

So, either you are happy to be here, utterly regretless, no matter the costs to others your existence incurred; or you suffer at least occasional pangs of guilt. If the goodness of your existence is incontrovertible to you, then you must condone those bad things having happened, since without them, no you – someone *else*, yes, possibly (with their own causes for regret) – *but not you*.

Regret with teeth

What follows from existence-regret? It would be odd if you said you regret something then made no effort or gesture to stop doing it. Even if the forces pushing for the repetition of the regrettable thing are formidable – and no one is suggesting they aren’t, at least admitting and expressing regret would seem

28. As contemplated by Kahane in “[Was evolution worth it?](#)” *Philosophical Studies*, Sep 2022.

29. No use crying over spilt milk. But it seems we should make an effort not to spill anymore – or, minimally, cultivate remorse when we do it anyway.

30. Smilansky, “[Morally, Should We Prefer Never To Have Existed?](#)” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 2013, Vol. 91, No. 4, 655–666.

31. It is tempting to respond by saying “if not *these* calamities, a *different* set...” and, in this way, excuse the set that resulted in us. But had those calamities happened, *others*, not us, would be the proper subjects of regret. The absence of *any* proper subjects of moral agency, to the extent we may do anything about it, is the aim of the antinatalist program. It is the most for which we, afflicted with consciousness of the predicament we are in, may be held responsible. Had an even more horrible world than the one we inhabit evolved in our absence, that fact would not excuse *our* lack of regret, given that *that* world didn’t happen. *Consciousness of the predicament, then, is the source of moral responsibility.* The rest of biological creation or development is not (yet, if it ever will be) in our predicament. This is what we get for having evolved thus far. We are threatening to outlast our welcome. This may be dawning on us.

32. *Op cit.*, Kahane, “[Was evolution worth it?](#)”

to be in order for a creature with pretensions to rationality, or occasional fits of it. Smilansky, himself, seems to stop short of going further, preferring to attribute absurdity to existence itself than to draw a moral lesson *for us*, but others are not so timid.

South African philosopher David Benatar draws the conclusion that if something bad is going to happen if something *else* happens, then we need to consider carefully whether that *else* can be prevented. If that something else is an unalloyed evil, it is clear enough what our attitude toward it should be. But what if the else is alloyed with good as well as evil? Then we need to weigh the badness of the loss of the good with the goodness of the non-appearance of the evil. Which, then, of these moral obligation weighs most heavily upon us:

1. the prevention of badness, or
2. the enabling of goodness?

Coming into existence is that “else.” Without existence, nothing bad or good can afflict – or bless you. With existence, and only with existence, are you vulnerable to both.

Removal of the possibility of being blessed with opportunities for joy and happiness is a *bad* thing. Removal of the possibility of being exposed to opportunities for pain and suffering is a *good* thing.

If it is in your power to remove these opportunities, it seems you should *not* do the first one and *do* the second one. But what if only one and the same act would remove both? *What if only by removing both can you remove either?*

The act of bringing a child into the world is such an act.

So then, given that you *must* do a bad thing in bringing a child into the world – by making it *vulnerable* to badness,³³ even accounting for the good that may also come of it (only by having been brought into being, could you be eligible for the experience of beauty and joy). Does the welcome possibility of doing 2 (enable goodness) outweigh the obvious imperative to do 1 (prevent badness)?

Benatar thinks not. Our duty *not* to do bad things *outweighs* our duty to do good things. You cannot steal from someone then make it up to them by giving them something of equal, or even more value, than what you took from them. This may well *compensate* them, but unless you believe that moral wrongs may be bought sold and sold, you cannot make someone “whole” in this way. You cannot excuse the initial wrong act by anything that happens later. (You may well be *forgiven* by the victim, but forgiveness presupposes the forgiven act was indeed wrong and should not have happened in the first place.)

We are talking *morality* here... To be sure, there is a well-known *legal* doctrine in which acts are indeed materially fungible. A tortfeasor may make “whole” his or her victim through some tangible

33. Even if nothing else worse happens in life, the *inevitable* badness of death – made all the worse by having enjoyed your life in any degree up to its end, only to lose it all – is something that might have been avoided – as it is millions of times each day with each unfertilized ovum or wasted sperm. At least, if you were so lucky as to have had a miserable life, then its termination might be a welcome relief. But maybe this is how it works: those lucky in life suffer more at its end, while the unlucky in life are in the end consoled. It is a sad commentary on life, that the worst lives are *rewarded* with death, while the best will have the most *to lose*.

compensation. This is the best civil rules may do to manage malfeasance. The bad thing cannot be undone, but we may manipulate how we *feel* about it. The notion of compensation was invented to help. But that does not remove the *moral* wrongness of the tort, assuming it was wrong.

Consider what would follow if this were not true. Rape and murder, then, would be *materially* excusable if the perpetrator materially compensated the victim or their aggrieved survivors. Actuaries, in fact, are at pains to assign monetary values to such excuses.³⁴ But none go so far as to say that the wrong has been *undone*. Our outrage is assuaged. That's the extent of it. That's the most we may hope for. But the world would *still* have been a better place absent the occasion for mere compensation.

Joy and happiness are such compensation. They don't justify the act that makes them possible, *given what else attends it*.

Alternatively, if Benatar is right about the asymmetric moral force of avoiding bad versus facilitating good, the first having priority, then the pronatalist may yet found their position on insisting that *bare existence* is the core principle of all morality. To be is, *in itself*, the "be-all and end-all" of morality. We could stand our ground here. All other norms are subservient. This intuition seems to ground foreverism.

But it leaves us to wonder why Parfit (or anyone) was so "repulsed" by an infinite number of sentient loci with happiness levels approaching asymptotically zero. Why does "repugnance" tinge the thought? If *just being here* is so worth it...?³⁵

Parfit's non-identity problem

British philosopher Derek Parfit, writing in the early 1980s, is famous for having inaugurated the field of population ethics. It was still then a time of worry about world overpopulation and what could be done about it. He articulated questions in precise terms that few had considered seriously before. One of them led to the non-identity problem.³⁶ Three illustrations:

1. A 14 year girl wants to have a child.

34. Insurance companies are under pressure to put a price on these things *because people, as a practical matter, insist*. How much is a rape worth, i.e., would make the victim "whole"? A few thousand, a billion? See the [discussion of actuarial considerations and calculations for rape](#), or for [loss of a life](#). Cost/benefit analyses combine with contextual factors to play heavily into these decisions. Similar cost/benefit decisions come up in [trolley cases](#) and [self-driving cars](#). The bottom line is that such things have a practical value or disvalue, in the sense that they are *priceful*: they have a price because of *one* of the entailments of being labeled "priceless" is that *some* compensation is a rational reaction. But there is another more literal and rarefied understanding of being "priceless" that insists *no amount of money can be relevant to its loss*. The term "priceless" in these discussions, thus, can have two meanings: the more common one is that the item so described is *extremely* expensive. The other is that it is a category mistake to associate *any* material value with it – like excrement, or the universe. Worthlessness and infinite value thus collapse into one. No compensatory reaction is possible, hence it is inappropriate to consider it. This leaves only the remedial cost-benefit analyses: *not* because anything is made "whole" by such assessments and the decisions based on them, but because *sometimes some* consequent harms, it seems, are in our power to lessen.

35. See, for instance, Simon Cushing's presentation on "[The Repugnant Conclusion](#)."

36. The non-identity problem is founded on the observation Parfit termed, "The Time-Dependence Claim: If any particular person had not been conceived when he was in fact conceived, it is in fact true that he would never have existed." Chapter 16, [Reasons and Persons](#).

Common moral intuition judges this event inappropriate and one that should be discouraged. *Why?* Because it may cause harm. *Who* is harmed? Three possibilities: the girl, the child, and/or society.

Suppose the girl. But she *wants* this child. In what way is she harmed? (We rule out, in our hypothetical case, rape, coercion, peer-pressure, etc. In such cases, the reason for the negative reaction is more straightforward.)

Suppose the child. Is it because *this* child's future prospects are clouded (compared to, say, a child she might have in her twenties, or even thirties)? Well, suppose she goes ahead and has the child at 14, *and* indeed, it is true that *the* child she might have had, at a more mature age, would have had better prospects. This child, born when its mother was 14, then grows up and hears that his or her mother should *not* have had her or him at the age of 14. Instead, she *should* have had her child at a more mature age. But what if *this* child (the one had when its mother was 14) thinks – *along with most children with similar histories, as a matter of fact* – that its life is perfectly well worth living? Why should its birth be considered by anyone a wrong or lamentable event? Certainly, statistically, *that* child born years later might have had better prospects, but *that* child would not be *this* child.

The problem is this: *had* she had her child at 30, say, *the* child had *then* would not have been the child she had at 14. The child she had at 14 would not *then* have existed. But suppose the child born when its mother was 14 considers its life worth living. Certainly, it would have been nicer if its mother had been a millionaire, but, given that likely she wasn't, overall the child is still happy to be here. Things did not go so badly for this child that its every living moment was hell. This child born when its mother was 14 is happy to have existed. Had its mother done the "right" thing and not had *this* child, *this* child would not have been better off. Some *other* – later – child might have been better off, but not *this* one.

It may be objected that the *only* morally defensible goal for any prospective parent *ought* always be to have *the child with the best possible future prospects*. This doesn't refer to any specific child. It refers to *a* child described as the one, *whichever*, having the best chance of those prospects. If that is true, then this mother should have waited. But *that* goal – the one of having *the child with the best possible future prospects* – is not relevant to any *particular* child's well being. The child "with the best possible prospects" is no existing concrete child. It is an abstraction. Failure to have *the* child with the best possible prospects does no *real* child, born at any time, any harm.

There is another widespread intuition in play here: the idea that for harm to happen, we must point to a flesh and blood victim. Where is the victim if she has a child at 14? It's not the one born when the mother was 14 because *that* child's life is still better off than it would be if it had never existed. A child born when its mother was, say, 30 is not in position to complain either. *In fact, no child born of a mother at any age is entitled to complain of its existence.*³⁷

Of course, we can reject the principle that seems to ground the repugnance: *Harm must affect some actual person: calling out harm entails calling out a victim. There are no victimless moral crimes.* (This is sometimes called the "person-affecting" view.) We could insist, instead, that *Well-being maximization: overall well-being should be maximized regardless of whose well-being it is.* We will return to this way out of the puzzle, shortly, but first...

37. Throughout our discussion of Parfit, we assume (with him) two things: the child is *not* born with a horrific congenital disease or condition *and* that it is *better* to have a life worth living, even if barely so, than it is never to have been born at all. This last assumption is typically contested by *existentialists*.

Suppose it's society that is harmed? There is this third possibility: that the *community* is harmed. Suppose the society the mother is part of will be harmed if she has a child at 14, as opposed to having a child at a more mature age. How so? Because the larger social unit comprising her and many others will have to expend more resources to support and care for this immature mother and her child than typically is the case when the mother is older and more established. Is it true that supporting young mothers is, in the final accounting, more costly to society than the support of older women becoming mother's?³⁸ This question imports a host of factors requiring empirical exploration: for example, there is recent but clear evidence that the postponement of motherhood, under current widespread economic and social policies, is resulting in unplanned *global* childlessness, and this, in turn, should raise serious concerns about an aging population *without* a younger resource-producing population to be sourced for that material support. The scale at which this happening is sobering, [if not catastrophic](#).³⁹ The takeaway, on the assumption the science on mass unplanned depopulation pans out, is that the cost of postponing motherhood may be fatal to society. How is that possibility not a steep price to pay? (On the assumption, again, that *depopulation* is *not* a good thing, contrary to the considered judgment of the *existentialists* that it, in fact, is. But even they acknowledge that *unplanned* depopulation has serious intermediate ethical consequences.)

Thus there are three competing moral intuitions in conflict here:

1. Well-being maximization: overall well-being should be maximized regardless of whose well-being it is.
2. Person-affecting harm is paramount: harm must affect some *actual* person: calling out harm entails calling out "a victim," and these victims cannot be potential, non-existing, "abstract," people, who in virtue of being potential, as a matter of fact, will *never* exist. Future people may, indeed, exist, but *these* won't be harmed by anything we do *if* what we do is a condition of their very existence: *whatever it is we do will be in the causal history of their existence*. If we do otherwise than whatever it is we do, they will not exist in order to blame or praise us. Someone (or no one) else will be. And these "elses," whoever they are (if anyone), assuming they appreciate their existence, can only have us to thank – no matter how "nasty, brutish, and short" their lives may be.
3. Never having been born is the best for all existents: this *is, as yet, so* for the non-existent, and *would have been so* for the existent.

The 14 year-old mother's behavior falls afoul of the third principle, obviously: the *existentialists* feel no child should be had at any age by anyone. As well as the first, arguably, on the widespread assumption, that 14 year-olds do not make the best parents. But her behavior does *not* violate the second principle: she does no harm to anyone you can finger because of a failure of identity between the child had at 14 and the child had at 30. *That is the non-identity problem*. Many will not accept⁴⁰ the

38. We will suppose society has an interest in augmenting or, at least, maintaining the size of its citizenry. No society *wants* (probably) to depopulate itself.

39. Consider the fictional film [Plan 75](#) which explores the consequences of an aging population and the dilemma this entails. A [video review](#) of the film. The depopulation crisis in Japan does not portend well for the rest of the world as explained in this non-fictional documentary, [Birthgap](#).

40. It does militate against the evolutionary cliché that we will do whatever it takes to perdure our gene-pool.

third, ~~existentialists~~, principle (however well-defended it may be) so failure to comply with it may not disturb them. That leaves the first: is she doing wrong by neglecting to maximize total world well-being? But this principle leads to Parfit's "repugnant conclusion," which we explore in the next section...

(See Resources below in case the non-identity problem is not clear yet. More illustrations, implicating "climate change effects" and "genetic modification for disability" may be helpful to extracting the outlines of the problem.)

Again, if persons change in an *unexpected* way, or at *unnatural* speed, a question arises whether these persons are *the same* as they were before the change. (The question is very clearly rooted in the evolutionary history of inquiry.) If these persons were objects of concern before the change, what reason do we have for caring about them after? *If* we decide they *are* the same,⁴¹ *that* may be reason enough, but what if we decide they are *not*? What if the change in question brings the persons *into existence*? If so, then there is no *before* to compare with an *after* in order to judge them "the same."

We don't usually worry much about these questions when there is clear continuity of identity before and after. This is the case when the change is incremental (are you the *same* person at 54 that you were at 24?) or not affecting some essential feature of the thing (a banana one day riper), when the change involved is *not* one that brings into existence the thing when the thing is an object of moral concern, e.g., a person. But the change that birth *is* is different. The path, then, in ordinary cases of change from *before* to *after* is not intercepted by anything that fundamentally alters the subject of the change, hence identity is not critically called into question, by the change.

But being born is not like that. Coming into being is a "singularity" among possible events.⁴²

We evolved organically. This means, among other things, that thinking *too* carefully about the future is not natural.⁴³ Our evolutionary ancestors didn't do this. Thinking strategically with survival in mind is all that gets selected for. Sophistication beyond that is a "game changer." Survival, previously not in play, is now on the table. It may not always be the case that we will never act to dispense with survival. This may come about because we become *aware* our actions now may bring about future people – or entities causally-related to us, and as well as the conditions in which these will "live," if they live. (E.g., climate change, etc.) This awareness has moral implications. Shall we care about these future people *impersonally* in the sense that all that matters about them is their portion of well-being, not the well-being of this or that individual? Their value lies in their function, in other words, *as vessels or containers* of well-being. That is, it matters not *who* they will be or *what* they will think, but only their container role. If so, we have abstracted from biological evolution. One course of action may maximize the total well-being of future people *if* that is all that matters. It is the *impersonal* maximization of well-being:

1. Well-being maximization: overall well-being should be maximized regardless of *whose* well-being it is.

41. But on what basis?

42. Or *would* be if death wasn't one, too.

43. Gene pools want to preserve themselves... *for awhile. Never forever.* No evidence for that. (How *could* there be?) Nature reveals no "understanding" of static forever states or conditions. "Organically," here, means uninflected by culture-level development. Cultivated (civilizational) normativity may take us out of the organic evolution game.

What is wrong with this principle? We'll see shortly that it leads to a disturbing thought. Because it breaks the tie between well-being and any particular individual, it leads to a situation that many may find unacceptable.⁴⁴ It may cause us to prefer a world with a vast number of people whose lives are barely worth living over a world with far fewer people having a much higher level of well-being.

...

Above, we examined Parfit's example of the 14 year-old girl wanting to have a child. If the details of that case are distracting, we consider two less hypothetical ones briefly:

2. Climate change and future people

A frequent argument for concerning ourselves with anthropogenic climate change is that *through the choices we make now* the quality of life of future generations will be affected. Therefore, we must take care now *not* to engage in behavior which will diminish the well-being of these people. Otherwise, the assumption seems to be, these future folk will have a moral claim against us. They will blame us *and be entitled to do so* for negative experiences for which we set the stage... But this line of thinking is less than clear unless certain problematic assumptions are spelled out.

Suppose we trash the environment thoughtlessly, and the quality of life of future people suffers. Their lives will be less desirable than ours – in *our* judgment. Will they judge matters the same? Will *they* blame us?... We ask because what we choose to do, whatever that is, will affect *who* these future people will be. If we trash the environment one set of people will come into being. If we are careful not to do so, a *different* set of people will. But both sets come into existence because of what we do. Unless you believe that *any* suboptimal life, as judged by our standards, is one *not* worth living, then those whose lives are the result of our bad behavior will have to prefer to have existed no matter how “nasty, brutish, and short” their lives will be. Will *they* judge their lives this way? Yes, unless their lives are not worth living, *as judged by them*, not us. What are they likely to feel about the value of their lives? True, we can imagine lives so horrific that we cannot fathom their having any value at all – in *anyone's* judgment. But is this *likely* to describe the lives of those who will live in our wake? Possibly. *But is it likely?* Do we have evidence for the likelihood?

Perhaps, our lives now, as judged by people in our past, are *below* the threshold of unpleasantness necessary to classify these lives as worth living *by these ancestors*. It's hard for us to imagine this, but it is possible. More likely most people living *now* would not trade places with those past people – *no matter what these past people would make of our lives...* We are here. They are not. Perhaps it is that simple. *Ours* is the correct judgment. This is existential bias. Ditto for whichever set of future people succeed us. It is *presumptuous* of us to say that they will blame us for whatever quality of their lives.

44. Instinctively so, biologically so. Revision of evolutionarily-conditioned affects are part of the foreverist program. If what is to count as “better” can be revised, then whence the norms that guide the revision? If these too are only evolutionarily-grounded, then these too may be revised... and then the question of whence the guidance – the new norms, the new yardsticks of “betterness” – recurs? If, for example, pain is a bad thing and a universe without it would be better and if its recognition as such – as pain – is dependent on the existence of pleasure to contrast with it, wouldn't a universe *without either* be better still, even the best of all possible universes? That would be a sentience-free universe. Didn't that describe *this* universe at a earlier time (and, maybe, again at a time still to come)? And if pleasure *is* to be comprehensible without anything to contrast with it, would these *comprehending* entities still be meaningfully related to us, *conditioned as we are*? Conditioned or engineered otherwise invites the non-identity problem and the specter of inter-cosmic indifference.

We must be wary thinking “this song is about us.” We flatter ourselves to think we, or anything we do, are *that* important.

This does not mean we are being irrational to blame or praise our ancestors. We can only judge from the place we occupy. But we are being irrational to think *they* would agree with our judgment.⁴⁵

3. Members of the Deaf Community wanting to select for a deaf child

People who have had little or no experience with what it is like to have a particular sensory modality, such as hearing, but have reason to value the quality of their lives will understandably bristle at being referred to as “disabled.”⁴⁶ The fact that we cannot distinguish as many colors as some species of seahorse, or savor experiences between smell as taste as cats and horses, or triangulate and identify at a hundred yards a tasty insect in mid-flight in absolute darkness as some bats can do is not a common reason to judge oneself “disabled.”

The community comprised of those described as “deaf” (by those outside that community) for all or nearly all of their lives has a complex culture enabling its members to cope with the world as successfully, in their judgment, as anyone not included among their community – that is, anyone in the “hearing” community, us, a community so dominant it barely notices itself as such. In what way are the lives or ways of life of those fully integrated into the “Deaf Community” lacking? Like many communities, such as ethnic communities, deaf culture has its own language and institutions and takes pride in being what it is. Its members do not deem themselves inferior to members of the enveloping hearing community.

Like members of the hearing community, members of the Deaf Community, may want families whose members reflect *their* values and share fully in *their* culture. They want their children to be deaf, because experience has taught them, this is the only way the transmission of culture necessary to the survival of their community can be assured.

Recent genetic technologies are making it possible to select for deafness among embryos.⁴⁷ Such an intervention insures that a child will be born deaf. This is a wonderful development for the Deaf Community. Many in the hearing community do not agree. Intentionally creating deaf people is not acceptable to the general hearing community. It is paramount to disabling a fully capable, healthy child. This is seen, by the hearing community, as gross physical child abuse – even criminal.

As with the 14 year-old mother and the climate change cases, in what way, however, is *any* person or child being abused by being engineered to be deaf. At the time of determining the capabilities of the resulting child, the embryo is not yet a child. There isn’t yet a child in existence in order to be abused. Indeed, absent this intervention *the deaf* child will never exist. *Another* child perhaps will. But *not* the desired deaf one. The existence of the genetically modified child is conditioned on its being deaf.

45. Where a causal trail can be specified we, of course, praise and blame. But it is harder to persist with such evaluations when the cause of the very existence of the one making the judgment is the event being judged... Leaving aside the ~~existentialist~~ principle that *no* life could be worth living to one not *already* living. Or perhaps, more precisely, the principle is that such judgments are incoherent in such contexts? But, being incoherent, they are especially prone to incursion by bias.

46. This may vary with the sensory modality: the *blind* community may have a very different “view.” It might may not be a “community” in quite the same sense that the Deaf Community is.

47. See, for instance, [“Is it ever morally permissible to select for deafness in one's child?”](#)

Choosing a different embryo would result in a *different* child, one whose capabilities were never in danger of being altered.

Parfit's "Repugnant Conclusion"

In the process of trying to solve the non-identity problem, Parfit tested the viability of the Well-being Maximization principle, the one that excuses our still finding fault with the 14 year old mother even if no one, in particular, is harmed. One way is to ask what is the *ideal* number of people we should try to realize, the one that maximizes well-being? Is there such a number? And how would we justify it, if there is? Let's lay out the reasoning:

Suppose we think we should pursue the strategy of making a world with 10 billion people 100% happy... (Pick your numbers differently. It matters not.)

Leave aside for the moment, questions about what "human happiness" amounts to, or how on earth we would ever get it to 100%. Assume we have some *vague* idea of what "happiness" is – some objectively tractable, measurable version of it – and that there is *something* we can do to get on the path to increasing happiness so that it makes sense embarking on it. These are *deliberately* optimistic assumptions, not necessarily realistic ones. The point is: if, *even under these rosy assumptions*, we are faced with disturbing consequences. More realistic assumptions can only fare worse.

We'll define one unit of "person-happiness" as *one person 100% happy for the duration of their life*. (So, one person happy 50% of their lifetime would count for .5 units of person-happiness, as would the total of two persons happy 25% of their lives.) Again, supposing, we shoot for 10 billion super happy people:

10 billion x 100 = **1 trillion** units of people happiness.

But wouldn't 20 billion people 90% happy be better? The math says so:

20 billion x 90 = **1.800 trillion** units of people happiness.

And wouldn't 30 billion people 80% happy be better still? The math says so:

30 billion x 80 = **2.400 trillion** units of people happiness.

Etc...

Wouldn't 900 billion people 10% happy be even better? The math says so:

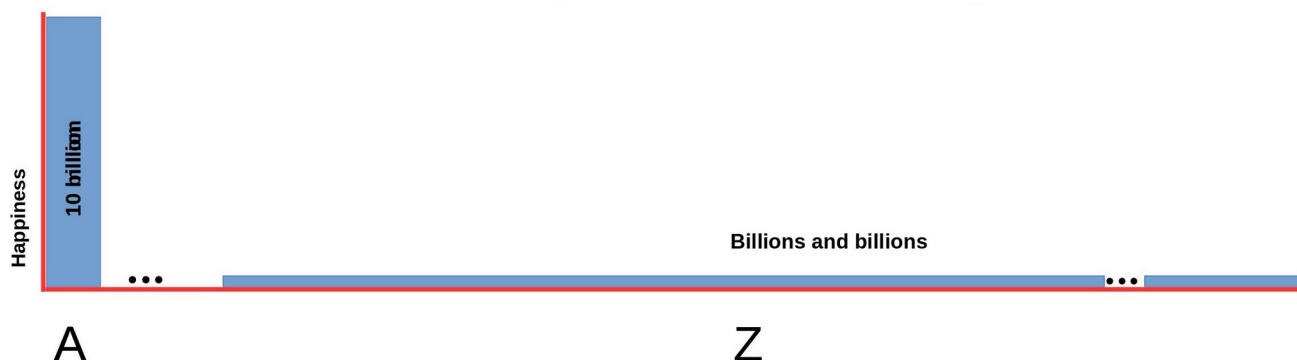
900 billion x 10 = **9.000 trillion** units of people happiness.

How about 10 trillion people only 1% happy? The math says it beats each of the prior possible world/universes before:

10,000 billion x 1 = **10.000 trillion** units of people happiness.

This means a world (or universe) with 10,000 billion people whose lives are *barely* worth living – they are 99% unhappy – is a *better* world than a world (or universe) with *only* 10 billion 100% happy people.

Is this absurd or what? Very basic logic leads us to a hard-to-swallow conclusion which seems to suggest that *as long as a life is worth living – even if it is so just barely – it is better that there be as many of these barely-worth-living lives as possible. Better than any smaller set of much happier lives.*



The horizontal red line is the line below which a life is not worth living. The blue areas are the measures of “person-happiness.” More is better. Z world, because its width can be indefinitely large, can be as shallow as you please and still outperform the “ph” of world A. Z world, then, is better than A. Right?

Parfit put it this way:

For any possible population of at least ten billion people, all with a very high quality of life, there must be some much larger imaginable population whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better, even though its members have lives that are barely worth living.⁴⁸

Is there a mistake here? Where?... Decades later, many thinkers (economists, demographers, mathematicians, population ethicists, etc.) seem to have gotten past this puzzle – not by solving it, but by looking another way.⁴⁹ The ~~existentialists~~ incline to look it straight in the face.

...

Again, those three competing moral intuitions:

1. Well-being maximization: overall well-being should be maximized regardless of whose well-being it is.
2. Harm must affect some *actual* person: calling out harm entails calling out a victim. There are no such things as “victimless” moral crimes.
3. That never having been born would have been best for all existents.

48. [Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 1984, p. 388.](#)

49. For a view questioning not so much the validity of the repugnant conclusion as its worthiness to claim so much attention, see [“The Repugnant Conclusion is a puzzle that has occupied philosophers and economists for decades. 29 scholars just published a new agreement.”](#) Dan spears, *Medium*, 2021.

The first leads to the “repugnant conclusion.” The second is blind to any but concrete harm. The third, “planned *unparenthood*” is the least considered... though it is making headway among thinkers – perhaps, because of the failings of the first two? But it has millions of years of evolutionary history to contend with. We did not evolve in order to go extinct... or did we?

Mass unplanned childlessness: the descriptive question

Regardless of where your sympathies lie in the foreverist v. ~~existentialist~~ controversy, real events may be overtaking sci-phi philosophy: [Birthgap](#) is a recent film documentary project by data scientist Stephen Shaw which presents credible evidence that *mass unplanned childlessness* is rapidly becoming a global phenomenon.⁵⁰ The *rate* of human population growth is slowing down. The population is still growing, *but the rate is not*. It is dropping fast enough that we will feel the impacts globally within a generation or two. It takes that long for everyone to notice, although some are noticing already: its happening in Europe, Asia (big time), and the Americas. Population growth is decelerating even in sub-Saharan Africa.

It is important to be clear what we mean by the *rate* of population growth versus mere population growth. Think of the difference between the *speed* of a car going down the highway and its *rate of acceleration*. A car traveling at a steady 60mph is still moving forward. It is covering more ground. But suppose five minutes ago it was doing 80, and five minutes before that 90, and five minutes before that 95. The trend seems to be that its speed is dropping faster and faster while still moving forward.

However, if the trend continues at the rate observed here, in the next five minutes it will be doing 40, then in the five minutes after that it will be going *in reverse* at 40mph. The rate of acceleration or negative acceleration (= deceleration) is a measure of *changing* speed, not speed. The trend we observe is that each five minutes the car is slowing down at twice the amount it slowed down in the five minutes before that, and so on. That’s how we can conclude that if the observed trend continues that the car will be going in reverse at 40mph ten minutes from now.

Analogizing the situation to population growth doesn’t mean (necessarily) there will be no people on earth soon (leaving aside some catastrophe) or a negative number of them. There are billions of us here already. Total *depopulation* is going to take awhile, *but not as long you may be thinking*. It means population *growth* will continue for awhile but its rate of growth will slow down. Eventually it will level off, it already has in growing number of places, and faster than you think. Barring something extraordinary happening, it will begin to drop, slowly at first, then faster and faster... Because of how deceleration compounds, this will be quite noticeable, not in some distant century, but within as little as a two generations. It’s been happening *already* for sometime very noticeably in certain parts of the world, but, by and large, it has not been a global concern, so few have been paying attention. That is beginning to change. The depopulation crisis is not something happening in evolutionary time, rather in historical time. This is not speculation or science fiction.

50. See the interviews with Stephen Shaw by [Chris Williamson](#) and [Jordan Peterson](#). Both Williamson and Peterson, are obviously pronatalist, but, especially in the Williamson interview, we get a deeper sense of where Shaw himself is coming from. He is not especially pronatalist or antinatalist, but more neutral and primarily concerned that those *personally* distressed about mass unplanned childlessness become aware of the global character of the phenomenon in order to process clearly what they wish to do about it – if anything.

Is this something to celebrate⁵¹ or lament? First, what exactly is the ideal birth rate? A birth rate that hovered around that needed to replace those who die, it's been suggested would be a candidate figure. That would be around 2.1 children per family. If that rate could be sustained, it would be good. But how do we create that situation on a global scale? The actual reasons the rate of population growth is decelerating – at first, a bit mysterious to demographers – it turns out, are *not* related to any conscious mass decision to sustain an ideal replacement rate of two (assuming that rate is ideal). It's happening for reasons that have nothing to do with sustainability. And it is not clear why those factors will not continue as they are until we are faced with major societal disruption. Sooner, not later. Depopulation is not an experience that humanity has had to face in historical times. We are not prepared for it. But, given that many have been lamenting the opposite, overpopulation, then what's the pressing problem?

Most developed societies have social support systems in place for caring for their elderly cohorts who may no longer productively contribute to society as much as when they were younger – or at all. This has worked (as well as it has) because there have always been proportionately fewer people needing such support than people needed to support them: the working-age tax payers. Ten workers might be taxed to support one retired person. As the current working age population ages and joins this retired group, the supported group balloons. In order to preserve support for them as no-longer-contributors to the resource pool, a proportionately larger number of resource-productive people will be required. Where are these *new* productive people going to come from? In as little as two generations, the population of even poor countries, traditionally sources for younger workers-to-be will drop below replacement. And the more developed the country, the faster and deeper the reduction in the pool of resource producers/taxpayers is happening. In countries like South Korea and Japan it is already at crisis level. Most of Europe is not far behind. Almost no place on earth is exempt.

Either the diminishing working age cohort will be taxed to exhaustion, or the ballooning retired cohort will suffer. That is the dilemma.

If the situation eased its way toward us over many generations, adjustments might conceivably be made. But the problem is speeding toward us faster and faster. And most people haven't a clue that it is, apparently. Great social disruption seems unavoidable. What will we do? Where do we even begin?

There is widespread surprise, even denial, of this development. It is easy to understand why. It was not that long ago that *overpopulation* was the problem. In the 1960s, a global resource catastrophe was being predicted by 2000 if the world population made it to 7 billion as it was then projected to do. It's well past that already. But no one *then* was predicting what is happening *now*.⁵²

What is causing depopulation?

51. Even philosophical antinatalists, like [David Benatar](#), must address this. Benatar is antinatalist for essentially negative utilitarian reasons: the minimization of pain and suffering *comes before* enabling their opposites. It will be interesting what he will say about this since he argues for *voluntary, lucid* depopulation, not the mass *unplanned* childlessness that Shaw is finding evidence for. Yes, Benatar argues, there is a moral imperative to depopulate, but not in this way. Generally, philosophers don't like morally-loaded events happening behind our backs. Is this a case of "be careful what you wish for" – or not?

52. It will be curious, should it turn out, that one anthropogenic (if it is *culpably*, in addition to *causally*, that) calamity ends up mitigating the effects of another. Human accelerated climate change, like unplanned depopulation, was *also* the target of deep skepticism in the scientific community (as all serious scientific proposals should be) when it was first submitted by Svante Arrhenius in the 1890s. Unplanned depopulation, if true, will reduce the deleterious experiences of climate change. There will be fewer to notice, to suffer, and to blame.

Something in the environment, in our genes? Is it part of the normal course of the lifespan of species, barring catastrophic extinction, that they evolve past instincts to survive?

No, according to data scientist Stephen Shaw, who thinks the cause is potent social norms, perhaps, originating from economic priorities, themselves divorced from a more realistic and holistic psychology. People have simply forgotten evolutionarily formed biological imperatives, having been distracted, perhaps fatally, by economic goals. But whatever the answer to the scientific question, none of this addresses the normative question...

The normative question: is it a good or a bad thing?

Should it be lamented or celebrated? Antinatalists applaud the outcome though few of them thought we would ever *voluntarily* come to embrace depopulation *for the right reasons*. It must have seemed a quixotic imperative. Were we not careful enough in what we wished for?

Is this happening because we are *more* rational than much of our history would indicate or most philosophers suspected? Not likely. Chances are, our strings are being pulled by adiabatic forces, by the aleatoric consequences of social norms – as in less self aware times, exclusively biological/evolutionary ones did. The speed of events suggests this.

*The species is becoming aware of its partition –
into those who have had enough and those for whom nothing will ever be enough?*

– Bianco Luno

Resources and related topics

1. Introduction to the Non-identity and related problems

For the uninitiated, Simon Cushing's video lectures on Parfit's [Non-Identity problem](#) and [The Repugnant Conclusion](#) as well as [David Benatar's Anti-natalism argument](#) are recommended.

2. On consciousness of suffering

“[Suffering](#),” Thomas Metzinger, chapter from *The Return of Consciousness: A new science on old questions*, eds. Kurt Almquist & Anders Haag, Axess Publishing, 2017.

3. What EA is, according to some philosophers sympathetic to it

I. What values unite effective altruism?

Though one may argue from non-consequentialist assumptions to an EA conclusion, EA is most firmly rooted in utilitarian principles. Here are some of its guiding ideas, quoted from the [Effective Altruism forum](#):

Effective altruism isn't defined by the projects above, and what it focuses on could easily change. What defines effective altruism are some **tentative** values and principles that underpin its search for the best ways of helping others:

1. **Prioritization:** Our [intuitions](#) about doing good don't usually take into account the scale of the outcomes — helping 100 people often makes us feel as satisfied as helping 1000. But since some ways of doing good also achieve dramatically more than others, it's vital to attempt to use numbers to roughly weigh how much different actions help. The goal is to find *the best* ways to help, rather than just working to make any difference at all.
2. **Impartial altruism:** It's easy — and reasonable — to have special concern for one's own family, friends or nation. But, when trying to do as much good as possible, it seems that we should give everyone's interests equal weight, no matter where or when they live. This means focusing on the groups who are most neglected, which usually means focusing on those who don't have as much power to protect their own interests.
3. **Open truthseeking:** Rather than starting with a commitment to a certain cause, community or approach, it's important to consider many different ways to help and seek to find the best ones. This means putting serious time into deliberation and reflection on one's beliefs, being constantly open and curious for new evidence and arguments, and being ready to change one's views quite radically.
4. **Collaborative spirit:** It's often possible to achieve more by working together, and doing this effectively requires high standards of honesty, integrity, and compassion. Effective altruism does not mean supporting 'ends justify the means' reasoning, but rather is about being a good citizen, while working toward a better world.

We're not totally confident in the above ideas - but we think that they are **probably** right, and that they are undervalued by much of society. Anyone who is trying to find better ways to help others is participating in effective altruism. This is true no matter how much time or money they want to give, or which issue they choose to focus on.

Effective altruism can be compared to the scientific method. Science is the use of evidence and reason in search of truth – even if the results are unintuitive or run counter to tradition. **Effective altruism is the use of evidence and reason in search of the best ways of doing good.**

The scientific method is based on simple ideas (e.g. that you should test your beliefs) but it leads to a radically different picture of the world (e.g. quantum mechanics). Likewise, effective altruism is based on simple ideas – **that we should treat people equally and it's better to help more people than fewer** – but it leads to an unconventional and ever-evolving picture of doing good.

4. EA aspersions from the (cultural) left

Abigail Thorn at [Philosophy Tube](#) offers her critique of EA, [The Rich Have Their Own Ethics: Effective Altruism & the Crypto Crash](#).

5. EA aspersions from the (cultural) right

God may or may not exist – though it would be nice if he did, since the universe may need protection from us. We quote here from Georges Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest*, trans. by Pamela Morris, (New York: Image Books, 1954), pp. 47-49.

... But Our Father takes our poor world as it is, not like the charlatans who manufacture one on paper and keep on reforming it still on paper. Fact is Our Lord knew all about the power of money: He gave capitalism a tiny niche in His scheme of things, He gave it a chance, He even provided a first installment of funds. Can you beat that? It's so magnificent! God despises nothing. After all, if the deal had come off, Judas would probably have endowed sanatoriums, hospitals, public libraries or laboratories. Remember he was already interested in the pauper problem, like any millionaire. *The poor you have always with you, but me you have not always with you*, answered Our Lord. Which amounts to this: [48] don't let the hour of mercy strike in vain. You'd do far better to cough up that money you stole, at once, instead of trying to get My apostles worked up over all your imaginary financial deals in toilet waters, and your charitable enterprises. Moreover you think you're flattering My notorious weakness for down-and-outs, but you've got hold of the wrong end of the stick. I'm not attached to My paupers like an English old maids to lost cats, or to the poor bulls in the Spanish bull-ring. I love poverty with a deep, lucid, reasoned love—as equal loves equal. I love her as a wife who is faithful and fruitful. If the poor man's right was derived only from strict necessity, your piddling selfishness would soon reduce him to a bare minimum, paid for by unending gratitude and servility. You've been holding forth against this woman to-day who has just bathed my feet with very expensive nard, as though my poor people had no right to the best scent. You're obviously one of those folk who give a ha'penny to a beggar and then hold up their hands in horror if they don't see him scurry off at once to the nearest baker's to stuff himself with yesterdays' stale bread, which the canny shopkeeper will in any case have sold him as fresh. In his place those people would do just as he did: they'd go straight to the nearest pub. A poor man with nothing in his belly needs hope, illusion, more than bread. You fool! What else is that gold, which means so much to you, but a kind of false hope, a dream and sometimes merely the promise of a dream? Poverty weighs heavily in the scales of My Heavenly Father, and all your hoarded smoke won't redress the balance. The poor you have always with you, just because there will always be rich, that is to say there will always be hard and grasping men out for power more than possession. These men exist as much among the poor as among the rich, and the scallywag vomiting up his drink in the gutter is perhaps drunk with the very same dreams as Caesar asleep under his purple canopy. Rich and poor alike, you'd do better to look at yourselves in the mirror of want, for poverty is the image of your own fundamental illusion. Poverty is the emptiness in your hearts and in your hands. It is only because your malice is known to Me that I have placed poverty so high, crowned

her and taken her as My bride. If once I allowed you to think [49] of her as an enemy, or even a stranger, if I let you hope that one day you might drive her out of the world, that would be the death sentence of the weak. For the weak shall always be an insufferable burden on your shoulders, a dead weight which your proud civilizations will pass on to each other with rage and loathing. I have placed My mark upon their foreheads, and now you can only confront them with cringing fury; you may devour one lost sheep, but you will never again dare attack the flock. If My arm were to be lifted for only an instant, slavery—My great enemy—would revive of itself, under one name or another, since your law of life is debit and credit, and the weakling has nothing to give but his skin.

Luno's commentary: "The argument from design, the ontological argument, the cosmological argument, even the one from absurdity, etc. all fail to impress me... I do like this one, though. The argument from human niggardliness. It places the problem of evil where we can see it. The *universe* needs God's protection, not us." [From: <http://aporia.net/phlogma/philosophical-hatred/god-exists-after-all-116>]

6. *The moral non-identity problem*

Briefly, the non-identity problem is a version of the ancient [Ship of Theseus](#) problem: how much about something may change before its identity is lost and it becomes something else. When the identity in question is a moral agent or patient (an entity within the range of moral concern), the problem generates the question of *why care*, any longer, what it does, or becomes of – or to – it if it changes past a certain threshold? Moral concern is essentially *bounded*. Unbounded change will erode concern: when you die and decompose, will the survival of the molecules that comprise your physical body be a concern for you, or anyone? Since your molecules are likely to preserve their structure for awhile, does this make you only semi-mortal? Or is it their *organization* that is the mortal part? But organization is an abstraction. Things are what they are: our sorting them into the organized and the chaotic is flagrantly anthropocentric/biocentric. Organization has handles for our grasping. Chaos leaves us lost. Abstractions, unlike molecules, may be reconstructed in a way that basic material elements of the periodic table cannot be through *ordinary* chemical reactions. (And if they *are* so reconstructed what will motivate the agency involved in the reconstruction?) So then, are these more basic elements that you hang *your* identity on sufficient reason enough to care? Such a tenuous understanding of identity is not, the argument concludes, within the scope of human imagination. And should it *become* so, as a result of human agency, the resulting understanding of "human" would fail to track what we mean by it now. As such, it would be a matter of moral indifference. This is the core problem of foreverism, in general. It seems foreverism is committed *either* to a (presently) bazaar stasis of human development, *or* to the transformation, gradual or otherwise, of humans into "we know not what." But entities under this description cease to be unproblematically objects or subjects of moral concern.

Sentiocentrists place the capacity to experience pain and pleasure at the center of *all* moral concern. It is one of the canons of utilitarianism. Sentience-capacity, sponsored by an *organization* of matter, is the abstraction that morally matters. Disrupting this organization is cause for "death," but the potential for its reconstruction in another form would take some of the sting out of extinction. Some sentientists are more narrowly biocentric, others more liberal. For the latter, a machine may develop the requisite

organization and complexity to claim the capacity.⁵³ Either way: *without* a more complex basis for moral identity than mere sentience, the placement has strange consequences;⁵⁴ and *with* such supplementation, it becomes vulnerable to the non-identity problem.

7. Parfit's "Repugnant Conclusion"

Ten billion people 100% happy 100% of their lives seems like a good idea.

We'll define one unit of "person-happiness" as *one person 100% happy for the duration of their life*. So, one person happy 50% of their lifetime (and unhappy the other 50%), or 50% happy *all* their lives, would each count for .5 units of person-happiness, or as 50% happy... as would, indeed, *two* persons each happy 25% of their lives, either happy half their lives or half-happy their entire lives. In other words, we are totaling happiness units: *how* they are distributed between people or between times of their lives or within the same person at the same time is not relevant here: only *how much happiness*, however happiness is defined. The total matters, not how it is distributed.⁵⁵ But we *do* define "person-happiness" as above: a unit of it is *one person 100% happy for the duration of their life*.

We might measure *total* human happiness thusly:

Number of people x Percent of happiness = Units of person-happiness (ph)

So, ten billion people 100% happy 100% of their lives can be calculated:

$10,000,000,000 \times 100 = 1,000,000,000,000$ (or one trillion) units of ph

Folks at 100% happiness, in more graspable numbers:

$1 \times 100 = 100$ ph

$2 \times 100 = 200$ ph

$3 \times 100 = 300$ ph

.

.

.

and so on. Thus at 10 billion people:

$10,000,000,000 \times 100 = 1,000,000,000,000$ ph = 1 trillion ph

53. What this would mean is considered by Thomas Metzinger, see Resources below.

54. The "vessel" problem with utilitarianism, for example: if only pleasure and pain matter – if pleasure is like wine in a wine bottle and pain its absence, and sentient creatures like us are the bottles, then modification of the known biological vessels of pleasure and pain into ones invulnerable to either – or, at least, the latter – would be an ethical mandate. Either break all the bottles or keep them full always. Empty, or partially filled, bottles are intolerable.

55. If it *does* matter how it is distributed, how so? Are certain people entitled and others less so? Who and why?

Folks at 50% happiness levels (these could be people happy 50% of their time, unhappy the rest, or people happy *all* their lives but only 50% happy at any given moment of their lives):

$$1 \times 50 = 50 \text{ ph}$$

$$2 \times 50 = 100 \text{ ph}$$

$$3 \times 50 = 150 \text{ ph}$$

.
.
.

$$10,000,000,000 \times 50 = 500,000,000,000 \text{ ph} = .5 \text{ trillion ph}$$

Folks 25% happy:

$$10,000,000,000 \times 25 = 250,000,000,000 \text{ ph} = .25 \text{ trillion ph}$$

Folks 1% happy:

$$10,000,000,000 \times 1 = 10,000,000,000 \text{ ph} = .01 \text{ trillion ph}$$

.01 trillion ph is 10 billion people who are 1% happy, or 99% unhappy (assuming none are indifferent about their lives – if there are such, then what?...) Being happy with your life at only 1% sounds pretty bleak. Still, we could say that .01 trillion ph is still better than no person-happiness at all. If it drops below zero, we have a clear bad outcome. We shouldn't wish to foster such a possibility.

But what if we are careful to consider *only* possible cases where the total ph level is *above zero* for each individual in the population? If so, even .000000001 or less ph is still ok. Because that times 10 billion is still going to be a positive number. And each individual life is *still* worth living. Extremely barely.

It gets worse (assuming you feel anything *is* getting worse – not everyone, apparently, does) because there is a way to spread that tiny portion of happiness around so that the total ph of a population is above our initial figure of ph for the 10 billion folks that we thought was a good goal to shoot for. That total ph was, recall, 1,000,000,000,000 or one trillion ph.

We can create more person-happiness than that easily: just make the population larger, say, 10,000,000,000,000 or ten trillion, so:

Folks with only a .01% portion of happiness *but one hundred trillion of them*:

$$100,000,000,000,000 \times .01 = 1,000,000,000,000 \text{ ph} = 1 \text{ trillion ph}$$

1 trillion ph is 100 times more happiness than .01 trillion ph... So, we would do better than our initial target to shoot for – instead of 10 billion – 100 trillion folks each with a few months (or less) of happiness.

In fact, how about a population of 2 at .01 happiness level, that's about 9.1 months of happiness each distributed between the two (assuming a lifespan of 80). That might come to either 9.1 months of bliss, if concentrated, or, if spread out, 80 odd years each of, at best, indifference, or something in between?

The difference *for individuals* between 100 trillion and 2 is not that different at .01 percent happiness. But there is no comparison as far as the total amount of personal happiness. More is always better.

Does this sound right?

The moral seems to be: we can do better and better at creating more happiness by creating more and more people so long as the total happiness is greater than that of any world with fewer people *and* the happiness of any given individual in this more populated world does not fall below zero. They may be relatively miserable (maybe, by our standards anyway), but not so miserable that they would rather be dead. (Or would they? How little happiness must you have before you consider being dead better? Suppose you had your millisecond of orgasm and your other moments were just a wash or worse as far as happiness is concerned?) Still, a world (or universe) like this – with quadrillions of folks – would beat anything like what we have now... if all that matters is *total* happiness. Why not an infinite number of people at a happiness level asymptotically approaching but never reaching zero?⁵⁶

And if there is something other than total happiness that matters more, then what is it?

Should it be *average* happiness, not total? Should we shoot for getting that *average*, not the total, to 100%? It turns out this move, also, leads (some of us) to confronting “repugnance.”

Switching to *average* happiness gets ugly in a hurry. So long as the average happiness is all that matters then we could still get a positive outcome in a world containing 10 billion 100% superhappy people *and* 9.999... billion folks 100% *unhappy*. 100% unhappy means all these people's happiness level would fall below the line that makes life worth living. Life would be hell for them. Still, adding up all the positivity of the superhappy to the negativity and the positivity of the unhappy then dividing by the total of all concerned, the superhappy and the unhappy, would average positive – just barely. We could make it so. Is that a desirable world?

So then, how many people at what level of happiness should we be aiming for?

Population ethicists divide on this. Some think we just need to get our minds straight. *Any* total or average happiness level above zero is a good outcome. We are being irrational not to see this. Our gut feelings are just too coarse to appreciate the goodness of the numbers... Others disagree. It's not, never has been, just about the numbers...

56. We need not confine ourselves to earthly resources: the solar system, the universe... is there for our taking! If the universe turns out *not* to be infinite, maybe we can figure a way to make it so. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Recall, we are eternal optimists! There is no *reason* to stop being so... So, it seems, the foreverists seem to suggest.

Perhaps we shouldn't be *aiming* at all, and let nature take its course? What does the past tell us about what course that will be? We have *zero* evidence that it will not be bleak for our present interests. Every individual, or species thereof, that was ever alive is either dead or – barring phenomenally optimistic thinking – *will be*.

Optimism, itself, has a claim to having been naturally selected for. It may be conducive to survival. For a spell. Thus much we can conclude. More?

8. Kahane “Was evolution worth it?”

Guy Kahane, building on Saul Smilansky's notion of *historical* regret, massively compounds the regret problem by considering *evolutionary* regret. He concludes, all said and done, we are not *forced* to have preferred our non-existence, even given the massive evolutionary debt our existence incurred, but, he admits, it's a weak case... Selections from Kahan's piece “[Was evolution worth it?](#)” *Philosophical Studies*, Sep 2022, with our commentary.

[from section 2.4]

Some realistic alternatives to actual history may have contained less animal suffering. But we saw that there is no realistic scenario on which the evolutionary process rolls on, and sentient, and perhaps also intelligent, beings emerge, yet where there was no massive animal suffering—*suffering on a grand scale is simply inherent in the logic of evolution*. [emphasis added] So the first choice we need to make within a naturalist framework is between a world that contains a great deal of evolutionary evil, and one in which the evolutionary process never gets going, or at least somehow never leads to sentience.

Kahane thinks that it is possible that some good (or more weakly, some *amount* of good) whose coming into being required vast evil *might* be justified: that some evil, even a great amount, was necessary for the emergence of some imaginable future good. Are we that good? Can we imagine something emerging from us that is *that* good?

Would we acquiesce, in this way, in a thousand-year Reich in which billions of humans were brutally murdered if this were necessary for a glorious future containing greater good? If not, how can we decently accept millions of years of quadrillions of suffering animals?

...

We therefore needn't resign ourselves, from an impartial perspective, to evolution unfolding in the specific way it actually did. We don't regret that evolution took place in some form. But we should probably regret that it unfolded in this specific form. We don't wish away evolutionary evil, but we likely wish away *Homo sapiens*.

Impartially, it seems we and nothing realistically stemming from us justifies the evolutionary horror show. But we are *partial*. That changes things. We have skin in the game. And maybe can't help having it. Obviously. But how do we square this with our aspersions to morality?

But our own perspective isn't this impartial. So I now finally turn to ask whether, from our collective human perspective, we are permitted to endorse this specific path leading to us. That of course is what we would prefer if we regarded things from a purely self- (or rather species-) interested standpoint. But I'm asking whether such an attitude could also be morally defensible—defensible in light of the verdict of a purely impartial outlook. In particular, the question is whether we are permitted to prefer a suboptimal actuality that includes us humans to impartially superior alternatives that don't—a kind of deontological prerogative allowing us to prefer, from our partial perspective, something that is less than the (impartially) best.

...

While we saw that here there's more space for impersonal reduction in the suffering animals would endure over the course of evolution, we also saw that we cannot be confident that the impersonally best alternatives would really involve such a reduction; and for all we know these alternatives might contain more animal suffering. Rather, the key factor in making some alternative impersonally superior to actuality is likely our replacement by more impressive intelligent species.

Evolution might have done better than us to justify its course. As it is, we are the ones making this assessment.

[from Conclusion]

...Even if we, or our better future descendants, will overturn this deficit, those howls and shrieks, going on for hundreds of millions of years, remain a blot on the past. Yet without this awfulness we would never have come to exist. It would be monstrous to look back with pleasure on the evolutionary process simply because all that evil was a precondition for our existence. But evolutionary evil is a causal precondition, not just for our own existence, but for the realization of positive value of any kind in our kind of universe: there's either millions of years of agony or nothing of value at all. And while I admit I remain uncomfortable about this conclusion, I have argued that, at least so long as there's a decent chance that the overall balance would be positive, we can nevertheless justifiably regard the grim evolutionary past as a necessary evil and, therefore, as having been worth it. We must, however, take seriously the crushing possibility that the actual past, and even all realistic evolutionary alternatives to it, are worse than nothing. But so long as we don't endorse this bleak view, we must conclude that, while our universe is obviously far from being the best of all possible worlds, evolutionary suffering is an inevitable aspect of the best of all realistically possible worlds.

Commentary

1. It sounds like collective rationalization to think “there's a decent chance that the overall balance would be positive” largely because we are interested parties to the conclusion. (Like asking a potentially-convicted murderer to break a tie among the jury as to his own guilt.)

2. But also, why think what *we* call *good* or *positive* would not be utter torture or unacceptably negative or subpar to beings with higher standards than us of what counts as such? These creatures with more refined sensibilities may yet evolve from us... Or already did and wisely dismissed themselves, in which case, we are either still here as an instance of devolution (we, descendants of the not-so-wise),⁵⁷ or our self-dismissal is yet in store.
3. Imagine a world/universe a bit worse than ours but with beings capable of doing Smilansky/Kahane style speculation (cross time moral assessments), they (following Kahane's lead) might *also* think their relatively good-impooverished (relative to ours) world was *still* worth requiring the necessary evil involved in bringing their world about together with its self-assessed modicum of the positive...

Now imagine one a bit worse still... and so on.

In this way, *any* world, as bad as any we can imagine, may be justified...

Perhaps the limit to this *reductio* would be reached when the animate inhabitants of the world/universe fell below the level of sophistication sufficient to support speculation... but that would be a world without us – or anything like us. Creatures in *that* world, mercifully perhaps, we might believe, would not trouble themselves with this emergent obstacle to the justification of their survival.

The bottom line is that it is the elimination of *consciousness* of the misery, not the misery itself, entailed by existence and its requisites that must be erased to permit survival *post-consciousness*.

If nothing more mundane or cosmic doesn't first, consciousness of the precarity of our excuses for being here will do us in.

...

But life must be "a thing of beauty," hence, "a joy for ever," Keats wrote. And not the brief flash between darkneses, as Beckett suggested...

Is this judgment a rational one or as instinctual as breathing?

Often, but not always, the two subjective qualities of positive affect and of successfully "making sense" are deeply intertwined.

– Thomas Metzinger

Yes, "but not always" does "making sense" have to do with anything.

9. Lexicality

57. Nature may sometimes wallow in its mistakes. It has, so to speak, "all the time in the world," after all.

Lexicality is the idea that permits such judgments as that:

1. some goods *may* justify any amount of evil, or that
2. some evils *cannot* be justified by any amount of good, or that
3. some goods are *better* than any amount of lesser goods, or that
4. some evils are *worse* than any amount of lesser evils.

Plausible examples of lexical thinking might be, respectively:

1. The greatness of rational beings like us being here justifies any amount of historical/evolutionary horror.
2. Extreme torture of one person, or a relatively few persons, cannot be justified by its benefiting a vast number of others.
3. Virtue always trumps any amount of pleasure.
4. Extreme torture of one person is not to be preferred over the minor discomfort of millions of others.

See Simon Knutsson's post "[Value lexicality](#)" for more discussion.

Kantianism, with its emphasis on rational autonomy as the supreme good, respect for which is the only ultimate foundation of morality, may incline toward the first type listed above. Kahane calls it "Rational Exceptionalism." (There are, of course many kinds of exceptionalism. This one focuses on what is perceived as unique to humans.)

Some may justify torture of enemy combatants and/or noncombatants as a means of forestalling harm affecting greater numbers of others. (The dropping of atomic bombs on civilian populations as at Nagasaki and Hiroshima.)



*Extended writeup for the topic hosted at
[The Philosophy Club](#) in May 2023*

*– Victor Muñoz
Guanajuato / Seattle*